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Commentary: Town makes it illegal to fly a foreign flag

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.
Special to CNN

SAN DIEGO, California (CNN) -- This is where we've arrived in this country: You have the constitutional right to burn an American flag, but you can get into trouble for simply flying a foreign one.

At least you can in the 30,000-person town of Pahrump, Nevada, which is close to Las Vegas and even closer to stepping over the line with an idiotic, intolerant and insulting ban on foreign (read: Mexican) flags. The town council voted last week, 3-2, to approve an ordinance that makes it illegal to display a foreign flag -- unless an American flag is flown above it. Scofflaws face a \$50 fine and 30 hours of community service.

Pahrump resident Michael Miraglia proposed the ban because, he said, he got upset when he saw immigrant activists marching through U.S. cities last spring, waving Mexican flags. Mr. Miraglia told USA Today that he was especially miffed that "we had Mexican restaurants closed that day."

So that's what started all this -- the fact that some guy couldn't get his burrito fix. It's our cultural schizophrenia. Americans love Mexican food, even if they don't always love Mexicans. They never ask themselves: If they succeed in getting rid of all the Mexicans -- as some would, no doubt, like to do -- who's going to make the food?

For the record, I don't think people should wave flags of countries they left behind or celebrate one country while demanding rights from another. But just because you'd like to see a given outcome -- i.e., immigrants putting foreign flags in mothballs -- doesn't mean you should use the coercive power of government to bring it about. The end does not justify the means.

Besides, the spectacle with the Mexican flags was no different than what happened a few weeks later when American Jews marched in Los Angeles and New York, waiving the Israeli flag to show support for Israel in its war against Hezbollah. About that, there were few complaints.

What gives someone the right to wave a foreign flag anyway? Answer: The First Amendment. Bans like the one in Pahrump are almost certainly unlawful and unconstitutional, leaving one to wonder, about Mr. Miraglia and the Pahrump Town Council, what part of illegal don't they understand?

What I don't understand is how immigration restrictionists can still insist, with a straight face, that the immigration debate and its offshoots haven't become anti-Mexican. When people brush aside distinctions of legal versus illegal immigrants and start banning the Mexican flag, what else do you call it?

As my friends in Texas say, I may have been born at night -- but I wasn't born *last* night.

At moments like this, I barely recognize my own country. Americans confronted slavery, the Great Depression, the Third Reich, and racial injustice here at home. Now some of us tremble at the sight of a piece of cloth. How sad. We're a bigger people than that. Even if some of us, now and then, tend to forget it.

Ruben Navarrette Jr. is a member of the editorial board of the San Diego Union-Tribune and a nationally syndicated columnist. [Click here to read his column.](#)

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